

A practical survival strategy in the event of catastrophe

By John Earl Silveira

The war's over now and all's well with the world but just a few weeks ago we were sitting in the offices of *BHM* when the bombing of Iraq started. CNN suddenly became a part of my life and uncertainty and pessimism seemed to rule the day.

Dave's poker playing friend, O.E. MacDougal, walked in and the first thing he said to Dave was, "You look tired." Mac the friend is hard to separate from Mac the poker player. He's always looking for things in people.

"I didn't sleep too well last night," Dave said. "Ilene and I were up late watching CNN and the bombing. We went to bed but she woke up about two a.m. and woke me up. She said she thought she heard gunfire and bombs. It was just a thunderstorm moving up the coast."

"I heard it," I said. "California weather—noise and no rain."

"It's on everyone's mind," Mac said.

"It must be pretty bad over there," Dave continued. "They said Baghdad was without running water, and food stocks were running low."

He hesitated and turned to me. "What's your angle on your column this issue?"

"Well, I've been trying to work up a vacation angle..."

"What if that happened here?" he asked cutting me off.

"What if a vacation happened here?"

"No. What if we got bombed or had some kind of a catastrophe like an earthquake or something? What if water and electricity were knocked out and there was no food? What would we do? We're not ready for that."

I shrugged.

"Could you do your column on that?" he asked.

"You mean a column about being a survivalist?"

"No, a common sense approach to surviving a disaster."



"I guess so. It'll be a lot of research. Maybe interviews with Civil Defense agencies."

"Well, what do I pay you for?"

"Certainly not so I can make my mortgage."

"Do this article for me and you can live in my garage."

I got the phone book and called the local library. I asked the reference desk to check their computer for a list of survival books while I went to the front of the phone book and looked up Civil Defense agencies.

"Want to go to lunch?" Mac asked.

There was silence. Mac said, "Silveira, do you want to go to lunch with me?"

"Oh, I thought you meant Dave. Sure."

We got into Mac's car and he drove us to a little restaurant in downtown Ventura. I just looked out the window on the way because he seemed to have something on his mind. I marveled at how pretty the girls in Ventura are.

We took a little booth near the window of the restaurant and the waitress brought us menus. Mac didn't look at his. In fact, the waitress brought him coffee without his asking and she put her hand on his shoulder while waiting for us to order.

As I read the menu Mac said, "You don't have to do heavy research for this column."

"There's going to have to be a lot of it to figure out how to survive," I countered.

"What kind of disasters do you want to survive? Earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, blizzards, terrorist attacks, chemical spills?"

"A whole bunch of things," I said.

"Leave out a nuclear war; keep it to the most likely disasters, and the piece will write itself."

"What do you mean?"

"Surviving is not a big secret. You spend every day of your life surviving. What you need to give your readers is a plan for how to survive if the world we live in goes 'bump' for a week."

The waitress asked me, "Are you going to order, honey?"

"He'll have what I'm having," Mac said.

She took the menu out of my hands and left.

"You've got to remember," he said, "roads may be out, stores closed, and utilities down."

"True," I said.

"So think of the things you need in a typical day, things you take for granted. You get up in the morning, that night you go to bed."

"Between those two moments you eat, keep warm, maybe pop an aspirin for a headache or put a Band-Aid on a cut, and you provide yourself with various kinds of personal sanitation you can't describe bluntly in your column without losing readers.

"Also, remember, in a typical day there's a whole passel of services you don't think about but you count on to be there. If there's a disaster you may have to provide those for yourself."

"Like what?" I asked. I had started writing down everything he said.

"Heat, light, fire fighting, medical emergency, water coming in, sewage going out. You'll have to find a way of dealing with these things yourself if services are interrupted because lines are down, or there's no way for them to reach you because roads are out, or no time for someone to help you because resources are overloaded.

"You have to present to your readers a way to make plans to ensure life goes on until the crisis passes or services are restored. That's what the foundation of a survival program should be."

"How would I do it?"

"It could be nothing more than some rules of thumb."

I swallowed hard. I knew Mac was going to write another column for me.

Food

"Give me a rule of thumb to cover food," I said.

"It's likely most people have enough food in their house to last a week or more. But how's one to know? In your column, tell your readers to check their canned goods."

"Why canned goods?"

"They're precooked, they keep without refrigeration, they don't even have to be heated up—though you'll be more comfortable if you provide the means of heating them—and they come in sizes that make manageable meals."

"Give me a rule of thumb."

"At least three cans per person per day for a week. That means for a family of four keep a minimum of 3 times 4 times 7, or 84 cans of food in their house. It can be things like beef stew, canned spaghetti, tuna, canned

meat, and so on. But they should be things they eat all the time.

"Also, avoid foods that require water for preparation, unless water is certain to be plentiful. So, they should avoid counting soups unless they're the kind that don't need water added. And keep in mind canned foods tend to have high salt contents so the more water they store the better.

"Store some cheap paper plates as well as plastic forks and spoons so you're not using water to wash dishes, and trash bags to put the waste in."

"Another rule to keep in mind; don't open your refrigerator unless you expect power to be out more than a day. In that case eat the food in your refrigerator before it spoils. Next, eat your canned food. And, if you have a stand alone freezer, don't even open it unless you expect utilities to be out for more than three days. You'd be surprised how long food in an unopened freezer will keep."

Water

"You said water. What about water? Give me a rule." I said.

"One half gallon of drinking water for each person per day. This is just drinking water. If you plan on washing dishes, the dog, or your underarms, add more. Jugs of tap water under a workbench in a garage or along the floor of a remote closet can be stored now at very little cost. Don't count on using water from a waterbed as drinking water because most waterbeds use an algaecide that's poisonous. And if you have a swimming pool or a pond nearby, don't count on drinking it unless you have one of the three following: enough fuel to boil the water you need for five minutes before consumption, iodine tablets—they're better than Halazone—which can be purchased from a pharmacy or camping supply store, or common bleach that is 5.25% sodium hypochlorite solution with nothing else in it like fabric softeners."

"How do you use bleach?"

"Add 2-3 drops per quart of water if the water's clear, five drops if it's cloudy, shake it up and let it set for at least an hour."

"What's next?" I asked.

Cooking

"A way to cook. Keep some charcoal around if you have a grill or hibachi. Don't use these indoors; a lot of people have died that way."

"If you have a propane or gasoline camp stove you're ahead of the game. Otherwise, see about buying one along with fuel. A camp stove is one of the two "expensive" items I would recommend to the survivalist. The propane stoves are best because the fuel doesn't spill and it has a longer shelf life than the unleaded or white gas variety. But whichever you choose, if you also have a lantern that uses the same fuel, so much the better."

"What about things like Sterno?"

"Sterno's good for heating things up; you just lose a lot of flexibility."

"Okay."

"Now you said 'lantern.' One lantern?"

Lists

"Two lanterns with plenty of fuel or twenty-one candles that last at least three hours each. That's three candles a day for a week."

"Why so many candles?"

"Get some candles and go home tonight and see how many you need lit to feel comfortable with the lights out."

"Okay," I said and wrote down twenty-one candles.

"You should also have at least one battery powered smoke detector in your house and two fire extinguishers; one in the kitchen, and one in the master bedroom."

"I don't know anyone with a fire extinguisher," I said.

"I don't either," he said. "But the smoke detector is more important than the extinguisher."

"Okay."

"What about sanitation?"

Sanitation

"Now, we've come to the second "expensive" item I would recommend. There are things you can do behind a tree in the woods you would be hard pressed to do in a city. Because of that it would be worthwhile to get a

chemical toilet. Even if you live in an apartment in the middle of a city, there's not a woman I know who won't be grateful to you if you provide just that one convenience. You'll be her hero forever."

I nodded as I wrote it down.

"And," he said holding up two fingers, "two rolls of toilet paper per person."

I wrote that down.

"Plastic trash bags to empty the toilet into."

I nodded and wrote.

"What about medical?"

Medical



"Most people don't realize it, but there's a good first aid and survival guide at the beginning of most phone directories. That phone book you used this morning has one. Pick it up and look at it sometime."

"What kind of medicine should be stocked?"

"Your medicine cabinet probably has just about everything you need. Check it and make sure you have aspirin, Band-Aids, eye drops, tweezers, cold remedies, diarrhea remedies. But more importantly, the people most affected by medical problems are the very young, the very old, and those who already have medical problems. Make sure you always have at least a weeks supply of the prescription and nonprescription drugs those people need."

"Also, talk to your doctor about a long shelf life antibiotic and a pain suppressant like codeine. I don't know what each state's laws on prescription drugs is but I talked to a doctor who understood I was going hiking in the Sierras and he gave me a prescription for codeine and an antibiotic that would carry me a week. They'd be real handy if you couldn't get to a doctor."

"I never used mine and when they expire I intend to bring them back to the doctor and get another prescription."

I wrote it down.

"Also, analgesic ear drops if you have very small kids. There's little that's more frustrating than a baby waking up with an ear infection and

all you can do is listen to it scream. It'll be worse if there's no way to get help for a week."

"Where do you get those?"

"Ask your doctor."

"What else?"

"Disposable diapers for a week if you have a baby."

"But disposable diapers are part of the environmental curse."

"How are you going to wash cloth diapers in an emergency?"

"Good point."

"Just be practical."

"What else?"

"Sanitary napkins. Even if there are no menstruating women, unscented sanitary napkins make the best compresses to treat bleeding injuries."

"How do you know that?"

"A cop in one of my poker games told me."

"How'd that come up in a poker game?"

"It didn't come up in the game. I date her now and then."

"Her? Who?"

"The cop."

"You date a woman cop?"

"Sometimes."

The waitress brought two plates of garlic and oil on spaghetti.

"How did you know I'd like this?" I asked grinning at my plate.

"You had a recipe for it in an earlier issue."

"Yeah, I did," I said, flattered he had even noticed.

"What's her name?" the waitress asked.

"Huh?" Mac asked.

"What's this cop's name?"

"Doris," he said and she dropped his plate before him and left.

"Do you date her?" I asked of the waitress.

"Let's stick to the article," he said.

Clothes



"What about clothes?" I asked.

"What about clothes. This is a home survival kit. You should already have clothes for whatever climate you live in your house. All I'd add is that every woman should keep a pair of walking shoes in her car and I personally always keep a heavy jacket and two blankets in my own car."

"Really?"

"Really."

"What else should someone keep in a car?"

"Make a car kit another column."

"Okay."

"What else?"



Radio

"Every home should have at least one battery powered radio and several sets of extra batteries. And remember to rotate the batteries on a regular basis."

"Okay," I said trying to eat and write at the same time.

"Give me something unique someone might easily overlook."

"Birth control. Condoms. You'd be surprised what people resort to when the television doesn't work—even married couples. Why take chances?"

I wrote it down.

The waitress stared at Mac from across the restaurant.



"What about guns?" I asked.

"We may need one to get out of here," he replied.

"What about for survival?"

"That's what I mean."

"What about for my column?"

"If you don't need a gun now, you don't need one in the kind of survival situations we're considering. If you feel you need one now, you'll need it then."

"Most survival scenarios of the seventies and eighties imagined gunfights with ethnic minorities pouring out of the inner cities to loot the upstanding white folks. It's a fantasy. I have yet to hear of an earthquake, blizzard, or any other natural disaster where the individual citizen needed extraordinary personal protection. If anything, people pull together. Black and white, rich and poor, old and young help each other."

"If you live in a rural area, you may find yourself going longer before services are restored. If large game is available you may already have a



hunting rifle. But it would also be worthwhile to have a .22 and even a shotgun for small game. If you're any good with a handgun, make sure you have some snakeshot loads. They're capable of taking squirrel sized game at close range.

"You make it sound simple."

"Ninety-five percent of it is. The difficult part is the five percent that makes you and your locale different from someone else's. Unique medical problems, small children, the elderly, someone sick, or just city versus rural living.

"Just remember, you're not trying to establish an outpost on Mars. You're trying to stay healthy, warm, fed, and comfortable until life returns to normal. This shouldn't be a great mystery and it's ludicrous to think it has to be high tech. It wasn't that long ago most of the people in this country lived out on farms or in small towns. They could live for weeks—through the winter and without getting into town—on just what they had on hand. All you've got to do is figure out how to do it for three days to a week.

"No one is going to starve to death in this country because of a natural disaster."

"What are you talking about? Sometime in the last 10 years some elderly person in the Midwest froze to death right in the middle of a city after their utilities were turned off."

"If it happened all the time that one incident wouldn't stick in your mind."

"True.

"What about surviving a nuclear war?"

"That's a whole, different story. In fact, that might make a future article."

"Anything else?"

"Every family should agree to a location where they should meet or leave word if they're evacuated from an area," the waitress said as she slapped the bill on the table and walked away.

Mac nodded. "And that's it," he said.

An hour later I was back at BHM.

"Where's Mac?" Dave asked.

"He dropped me off and went back to the restaurant. He said he had a survival situation of his own to work out." Δ

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